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SUBJECT: CAMEROON PRESS FREEDOM AT RISK

1.(U) Summary: This cable is an overview of progressive restrictions, over the last six months, imposed on press freedom in Cameroon and a read-out of government infringement of the laws regulating the media.

CLOSING MEDIA OUTLETS CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT

2.(U) On February 21, Minister of Communication Jean Pierre Biyiti Bi Essam signed an order, read over state-run CRTV radio's early afternoon news bulletin, to close Equinoxe TV, a private television station operating out of Douala. The minister invoked "illegal broadcasting" as the reason for the measure. Equinoxe TV began broadcasting in April 2006. According to the minister, Equinoxe was operating without an audiovisual license. On February 22, eight policemen entered the studio of sister station Radio Equinoxe to seal the premises of this popular Douala radio station. The radio had begun broadcasting in March 2002. According to Embassy sources, Littoral Province Governor Francis Fai Yengo was behind the decision to close Radio Equinoxe. The two stations, which together employ 150 people, belong to the same promoter, Severin Tchounkeu.

3.(U) On February 28, according to the President and General Manager of another popular, private radio station and Voice of America affiliate, Magic FM, some 200 gendarmes and security forces entered Magic FM's Yaounde studio. The security deployment confiscated all broadcasting equipment. Since then, the authorities have continued to silence the station without any written notification or official reason. Ministry of Defense authorities informed Magic FM's representatives that the Minister of Communication considered the radio to be very critical of the Biya regime during an interactive program on the morning following President Paul Biya's February 27 speech to the nation at the height of the recent civil unrest. The government reportedly did not appreciate that "Magic Attitude" call-in listeners voiced vehement criticism of the Head of State. As is the case for nearly every private television and radio stations currently operating in Cameroon, Magic FM lacks a government-issued audiovisual broadcasting license. Magic FM has 20 people on its payroll. Equinoxe TV, Radio Equinoxe, and Magic FM have an accumulation of unpaid fixed expenses with each passing day.

¶4. (U) The sudden closures of three private audiovisual enterprises within almost a week has reduced the flow of information from independent sources and put a dent in aired public debate. Although the 2000 decree implementing the 1990 law on social communication, which liberalized the audiovisual sector in Cameroon, requires all private audiovisual structures to have licenses, the Ministry of Communication has granted only four thus far. All of these -- two television stations, one radio station, and a cable distributor -- were granted in a single ceremony on August 30, 2007. Sixty other private radio and television stations in the country operate under administrative tolerance. By not granting licenses, the government retains the upper hand and has leverage over private audiovisual media, should the private media need to be reminded that program content critical to the regime will result in closure.

15. (U) This stepped-up repression of the media in Cameroon comes at a time when the debate against the revision of the Constitution is high in the minds of public opinion. The Government of Cameroon, in selective monitoring, is muzzling media houses that relay views opposed to the regime or that side with those not in favor of removing presidential term limits. Minister of Communication Biyiti Bi Essam regularly calls upon journalists to exercise caution when dealing with matters relating to the Cameroonian army and/or matters of sovereignty. For many media professionals, the minister is using code words that ultimately require the journalists' complicity and translate into self-censorship. He has requested that journalists not disclose any information critical of the regime. The crackdown on the media has brought with it true fear within the media community. Some media houses have suspended interactive call-in programming, and the determination to practice self-censorship is not precisely a choice. During the civil unrest, many journalists reported intimidation by anonymous callers and threat messages passed on through third parties. Since his appointment on September 7, 2007, the Minister of Communication has monitored closely even the state-owned media to ensure that journalists report favorably on the government and avoid tarnishing the country's image.

USG PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

16. (U) The Embassy has pushed to have the summary measures responsible for closing the three audiovisual outlets reversed. Visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary James C. Swan, Ambassador Garvey and Information officer Judith Ravin have all gone on record as advocates for media pluralism, freedom of the press, and freedom of expression. Despite critical statements by Reporters without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Freedom House, the government of Cameroon has made no significant progress toward restoring equipment or processing submitted license fees to permit these media organs to resume broadcasting and serve their communities.

GARVEY